

# ONCE A MASON ALWAYS A MASON

THIS is a saying with a respectable antiquity of tradition behind it. True, it is not very often heard among us now, except perhaps among the older members of country lodges, nor has it ever been incorporated in any official pronouncement or formula. Nevertheless it comes down to us as one of the apothegms, or pithy utterances, in which our Masonic forbears gave expression to their conception of what Masonry was and what it implied.

Every living organism, and every institution that is alive, is subject to the changes enforced by the changes in its environment; there is no standing still, and Masonry being alive is subject also to this law. Yet the conservatism and the clinging to ancient tradition that marks the Fraternity is also a real functioning force. We cannot stand still in a moving world, but our ancient constitutions and landmarks determine the lines upon which we advance. It is therefore not without reason that we are all taught to look to them and keep them ever in mind.

There are many things about the Craft as an organization that are widely different from other societies and fraternities. The new members of the Order are constantly bringing in ideas derived from their previous knowledge and experience. It is an elementary function of the lodge to teach them that such ideas do not belong to Masonry. For an example, it is not of very great or fundamental importance but will serve to show what is meant, in conducting its business affairs the lodge acts as a democratic deliberative assembly. The Master presides, and to the young Mason he seems to have the same position as the chairman or president of other bodies. It may be some time before he learns, and it may be only in "butting into it" himself, that the Master is much more than a chairman, that he decides at discretion what business shall be discussed, in what order, and who shall speak and when, and that there is no appeal against his ruling or decisions except to the Grand Master and the Grand Lodge.

In most other societies and associations the bond between the individual and the group to which he belongs is not a very strong one. A man joins easily, and departs in the same way, and that ends it. There is an alarming tendency among us today to view the Masonic tie in a similar manner. It is from one point of view only an aspect, a constituent part, of that general development which has led on the one hand to the influx of such large numbers of men into the Craft, and on the other to the disquieting increase in the percentage of Masons suspended for non-payment of dues. In most societies to cease to pay one's quota to meet the expenses of the organization is to cease to be a member, and it is natural that the same way of, looking at the relationship should creep in, and even find explicit expression as it sometimes does.

But in Masonry, there is much more than this financial bond, this "cash nexus," as Carlyle, in another connection, phrased it. In times past a clear distinction was made between membership in the Fraternity and in a lodge. Initiation did not automatically make a man a member of the lodge in which he received light. The distinction still remains even though the regulations of our Grand Lodges now make the two things concurrent; election to the degrees is also election to membership, initiation is tantamount to becoming a member. Yet a Mason can always sever his connection with his lodge, and his lodge can always suspend him for not paying his dues. Here again disciplinary measures have been extended. Originally such suspension was only from that particular lodge, his standing as a Mason in other lodges

was not affected, but now as an additional sanction, and a self-protecting measure, all lodges have agreed to honor the suspensions of each one, for that in effect is what the various Grand Lodge edicts, statutes and regulations on the subject amount to, so that in effect a man suspended in one lodge is suspended from the Craft. The danger is that this practical consequence may be used as a basis for argument that, being practically (though not theoretically) suspended from the Craft through the fact of his suspension being effective in all lodges, it follows that he is no longer a Mason, and is as much out of the Fraternity as if he had never been in it.

Although this general effect of local suspension has found a place in the ritual (there has been a marked tendency among American ritualists to insert the expression of new laws into our ancient formulas) yet it ought not to be interpreted in a way that nullifies other, and more authoritative utterances.

Too often the ritual is regarded as something merely to be learned and repeated; even its plain and obvious sense is often ignored. Naturally we must here speak darkly and allusively, but let our readers consider the relevant places and what is stated. They will see on consideration that first of all every Mason takes upon himself voluntarily, and after due warning phrased in the most emphatic language possible, certain obligations that he can never thereafter repudiate or lay aside. He may cease to pay dues, he may cease to be interested, he may forget all about it, he may even become hostile, nevertheless - because they were voluntary - those obligations remain morally binding upon him so long as he lives.

The next thing to notice is that these obligations are not to an institution, to an organization, but to individuals - to sum them all up they bind him to regard, and act towards, every other Mason as if each and every one was his own blood brother - and it is just as irrevocable and unescapable as blood relationship. However much it may be ignored, forgotten and disregarded, however unworthy a man may prove to be, so far as these obligations are concerned, once a Mason is to be always a Mason, even if suspended, and even if expelled.

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